

Diversions, posturing as school board votes to reopen school in small-town Massachusetts

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School districts across Massachusetts are finalizing their plans for a September start to the fall semester. The vast majority have voted for a hybrid model. Though the plans vary in details, essentially students alternate between in-person and remote learning. Teachers will report to school every day and come in to contact with all of their students in a given week. For middle and high school teachers, this amounts to close contact with up to 150 or more adolescents in a five-day period.

These decisions have outraged communities across the state, especially after a recent uptick in positive cases has led Governor Charlie Baker to reintroduce social distancing measures. Meanwhile, his administration has doubled down on its return to school campaign by pushing the vast majority of the state's 289 school districts to resume full in-person learning.

Scituate, a small coastal town south of Boston, is one example of broader situation. Its school committee voted 4-1 Monday night to approve a hybrid plan for reopening schools in the fall. The meeting, which began with statements from the superintendent, Bill Burkhead, and the five members of the committee, included an extended period for public comment in which parents and teachers voiced their objections to the proposal. In general, the proceedings were marked by attempts of committee members and the superintendent to dodge accountability and an informed and spirited resistance to the plans on the part of members of the public.

Up to this point, Superintendent Burkhead had uncritically accepted and praised all guidance and protocols issued by the Massachusetts Department of Early and Secondary Education (DESE). However, in a theatrical about-face, Burkhead began Monday's proceedings with a tirade against Baker and Education

Commissioner Jeffrey Riley for not providing clear directives for local officials. While the Baker administration and Riley in particular deserve criticism for their reckless reopening of schools, the superintendent's sudden upswell of indignation meant only to curb and deflect public anger as they moved to reopen classes. The committee members, likewise seeking to shield themselves from criticism and accountability for what they clearly recognize as a dangerous act, lauded the superintendent's grandstanding.

One school committee member speculated that the pandemic would "go on forever" even with a vaccine and suggested that communities must immediately grow accustomed to the risk as with the seasonal flu. The superintendent asserted that extended school closures would result in increased suicides.

A question from a teacher revealed that the committee did not fully understand what it was poised to vote on. Apparently, some of the members believed they were only approving the general plan, which by state mandate had to include measures for fully in-person, hybrid and fully remote models. Others believed they were voting to approve Superintendent Burkhead's decision to start with the hybrid model on September 16. This was debated at length and the committee changed its mind twice before deciding to vote on hybrid to start the year. The urge to defer to state officials, to a "metric", to a constantly receding temporal horizon when a firm decision can be made, reveals the discomfort of a body that on some level recognizes the danger of reopening schools, but are compelled by political pressure to do so.

Janice Lindblom, a social worker employed by a nursing and rehabilitation facility located in the town, was the only dissenting voice. Lindblom pointed out

that a safe reopening would be impossible without large-scale proactive testing with rapid turnaround times, a condition which is simply not on the table.

In stark contrast to the evasions and confusion of their local leaders, parents and teachers demonstrated a highly informed skepticism of the district's plan, both in terms of safety and quality of education. First to comment was a teacher with twenty years of experience in the district. Citing a comprehensive study conducted in South Korea which concluded that older children transmit the disease at rates *at least as high* as adults, he noted that the aging faculty of the high school would face significant exposure to infection on a daily basis. He further noted that the lack of substitute teachers, a chronic problem for districts across the state, would undermine protocols meant to ensure even the minimal social distancing called for under the plan (3 to 6 feet). All such concerns were "taken under advisement," meaning neither the superintendent nor the school committee could answer the objections, not for a lack of planning, but because the return to school in the midst of a pandemic poses an array of insoluble problems.

Several parents raised concerns about the options available to families afraid to send their children into crowded and confined spaces. The state has contracted with Edgenuity, a for-profit company that provides a fully automated learning program, which has mostly been used to "serve" students for whom traditional models have failed. In reality, the program boosts graduation rates while providing little remediation to struggling students. Parents rightly noted that this option would isolate students from their peers and teachers, provide a separate and unequal education, and effectively privatize a significant portion of Scituate Public Schools.

Another veteran teacher questioned the accuracy of test positivity rates in gauging the prevalence of community spread, citing evidence that suggests actual infection rates far outpace reporting. Surprisingly, committee members agreed, contradicting their earlier calls for a "metric" to determine policy. Nevertheless, they voted to approve a return to in-person learning. In reality, this was an economic decision made many months ago.

These and countless other comments exposed the plan as a dangerous and short-sighted capitulation of

common sense to powerful financial and business interests, served by the Baker administration and executed by district superintendents and local school boards. The wealthy have a lot riding on the return to work, which depends on the return to school. Otherwise, stock valuations propped up by massive infusions of fictitious capital will plummet even faster than they did in mid-March.



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